**CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY IN PAKISTAN**

Pakistan, since its day of inception, has faced several challenges to establish a true democratic system, which could guarantee its survival, stability and development. Every democratic period has been followed by the military rule. Unfortunately, the plant of democracy has not taken its roots deep enough to make the country, “a durable democratic state.” This is the reason that until now democracy in Pakistan is prone to many threats. These threats emanate from internal as well as external factors. Internal threats include political, social, economic, as well as religious which have resulted in the weakening of democracy in Pakistan. Lack of mature leadership, confrontation between the main organs of the state, poor relations between the centre and the provinces, rampant corruption, distrust among the politicians, strong bureaucracy and crisis of governance are the immediate threats to democracy in Pakistan. Furthermore, meddling with the constitution has also dealt a severe blow to democracy in Pakistan. In addition to this, terrorism, energy crisis, ethnicity and sectarianism, domestic violence, religious intolerance, economic instability, unemployment, and recent natural calamity is posing a great threat to democratic government in Pakistan. Not only this, but recurring foreign interventions in our national affairs, our country’s tarnished image across the world, and weak diplomacy is also contributing in destabilizing democratic setup. Fuelling to the fire, Government’s indifference towards people and its inability to resolve these problems is mounting frustration among the masses. This frustration is proving venomous and it could derail the process of democracy in Pakistan.

**Lack of leadership**

**Lack of leadership** is one of the greatest threats to democracy in Pakistan. Since the tragic demise of the great Quaid we have been devoid of mature and competent leadership. Absence of visionary leadership has been the biggest dilemma for the country. Our leaders have always served their own vested interests and have divested the nation of the basic amenities of life. In such conditions, democracy has suffered a lot and is still suffering. The malignant intentions of our political spearheads, have not only smudged the image of Pakistan before the globe, but have also proved fatal for the democratic survival.

**Political environment**

For a sturdy **political environment**, the conformity between all the institutions of the government is pivotal. In the absence of mature and sensible leadership, the confrontation between institutions is prevailing. For instance, the government’s non-compliance with implementation of the decisions of the Supreme Court on various matters of national importance (including the NICL corruption case) is a point of concern. Consequently, there is surfacing a government-judiciary mismatch. By thwarting an oversight of the court, the government is trying to run its affairs, in which the top priority is to complete the tenure. The clash between the main organs of the state has been leading to the catastrophe of the democratic state.

**Poor relations between centre and the four provinces of the country** are also a threat to democracy. Coordination between them is essential to run the machinery of the state smoothly. On the contrary, the centre and provinces have always been at loggerhead with each other. Disharmony over natural resources and other issues have kept democracy under strain. The tragic fall of Dhaka was the result of such contentious relations. That’s why; Pakistan has always been experiencing political instability. These conditions have again and again provided army a rationale to topple the civilian government.

**Military Role**

The ongoing turmoil has started a new debate about the military role in the democratic setup. Due to lack of political insight, our politicians have frequently invited the military, to topple the democratic government by opting unconstitutional means. Thus our incompetent leaders have endangered the survival of political and democratic values of the country. Resultantly, the seed of a great democratic culture, sowed by the great Quaid, never appeared to turn into a strong tree.

**Meddling with the constitution**

In addition, meddling with the constitution has caused ineffaceable damage to democracy. A constitution is considered as a guardian of democracy. Unfortunately, the constitution, which was drafted after nine years of the independence in 1956, was strangled after military coup by Ayub Khan in 1958. A proper constitution was formulated in 1973, but every dictator trimmed this constitution in accordance to his own personal interests. Moreover, our political forces have also played a horrible role in deteriorating the original draft of the constitution. Resultantly, we have remained unable to protect the strong democratic traditions.

**Strong bureaucracy and feudal system**

Strong bureaucracy and feudal system are another threat to democracy. Their secret coalition is hindering the growth of democracy in a smooth way. Their compromise with each other has resulted in the accumulation of power in fewer hands. Even the universal suffrage could have not been effective. Thus, the circulation is power in a handful families is making the structure hollow. Today we will hardly see people from middle class and lower class in politics, because of sheer force and influence of these politicians, such class could not get free hand to participate in politics that is absolutely against the Democracy. Noam Chomsky has rightly said about derailing of democracy that” if you want to restrict democracy transfer power of decision making from public arena to unaccountable institutions, kings and princes, priestly castes, military juntas, and feudal Lords.”

**Political Disharmony**

Political disharmony is proving to be venomous for the democratic setup. All the major political powers are busy in point scoring and blame game. They are least concerned with addressing the problems of the nation, and hence, a sense of deprivation among the people is replicating immensely. Without cooperation between the political supreme, the dream for a durable democratic state would remain a fantasy.

**Corruption**

Adding fuel to the fire, rampant corruption is proving catastrophic for democracy to survive. Corruption remains a substantial obstacle for Pakistan and democratic system. Transparency International (TI) has ranked Pakistan 34th most corrupt nation in the world. First government of PPP in 1988 was sacked because of charges of corruption, similarly elections held in 1997 were accused of such charges, and the recent compromise on corruption in the form of NRO, has raised many questions in the minds of nation against the credibility of political elite. The menace of corruption is hollowing the roots of already weak democracy.

The spectre of corruption is growing stronger in absence of true accountability. Accountability which aims at strengthening the roots of democracy is lacking in our country. The national anti-corruption agency, National Accountability Bureau (NAB) which was created in 2002 and endowed with the powers of investigating and prosecuting the cases against the corrupt leaders, has failed to play its role effectively. . Thus, in the absence of accountability everyone, whatever illegal he does, thinks it as his right. It is a sort of deluge which is weakening the democracy to its roots and posing a great threat.

**Lack of Accountability**

Lack of accountability coupled with crisis of governance is posing a challenge to the smooth running of the system. Pakistan is facing a constant dilemma of poor governance. It has generated mistrust and has undermined the proficient and transparent delivery of public services and the implementation of programs in an efficient manner. Poverty has been growing in the country at an alarming level and in just last three years of democratic regime, it has reached to 40 per cent from 17.13 per cent in 2008. Owing to increasing poverty, people find themselves challenged even to procure basic staples such as flour and pulses. Pakistan’s level of human development is low and its education indicators are the worst in South Asia. Despite having huge natural resources, our country has entered into a stagflation, which is the worst-ever scenario. Investment is rapidly flying from Pakistan due to unfavourable economic environment in the country which is not a good omen for democracy.

**Poor governance**

Owing to poor governance, the government is losing control over law and order situation. When individuals put themselves ahead of institutions, they set a bad example. Suicide attacks, target killing, robbery and other crimes have become norm of the day. Innocent people have been killed on ethnic basis and government seems helpless in this regard which is also a dangerous sign for democratic rule.

The current pathetic situation of conflicts and distrust are solely the outcomes of a weak democratic setup. Media plays a pivotal role in moulding and reshaping the beliefs of a lay man. Unfortunately, the recent media hype in relation to the political activities has been aggravated the situation. Media’s biasness has ignited a flame of political imbalance and disharmony which in turn, has been weakening the roots of democratic culture in Pakistan.

**Weak Judicial System**

Another matter remains to be one of the major threats to democracy is the weak judicial system of Pakistan. Every now and again when the democratic rule was deposed by the military ruler the weak judiciary played a crucial rule in strengthening the hands of military. The weak judiciary has provided every military a legal cover under the pretext of expediency. In current scenario, there is again a threat that history could repeat itself if the guardians of democracy continued to disrespect the norms of democracy and judiciary.

Above mentioned threats to democracy relate to the political sphere which are collectively giving rise to social threats. Poverty stricken society, illiterate masses, social injustice, domestic violence, sense of insecurity and frustration among the masses are sowing the seeds of hatred for democracy.

**Poverty**

Weak and poverty stricken society, gives birth to resentment. A society, lacking food security, is least concerned with their rights. Fraternity and impartiality could not be the hall mark of such a culture, where more than half of the total population of the country is living below the poverty line. Consequently democratic trends cannot prevail in such an environment where the people are paying tax even on the purchase of a match box and the grain is getting beyond their reach.

**Illiterate Masses**

Furthermore, illiterate masses, have also contributed in deteriorating the political system of the country. A nation with such a low literacy rate can only breed a frail political and democratic culture. An educated person is aware of his rights and can fight for the principles, and resultantly, his voice cannot remain unheard. Contrary to this philosophy, an ignorant society weakens the democratic values.

**Political psyche of the people**

Sadly, the political psyche of the people is also very negative due to low level of political awareness and socialization. And this trend allowed the hegemonic forces to keep media, educational institutions, peers and public forums from incorporating a political consciousness into the people. The masses are even not able to resist the Martial Laws, and the civil society is always succumbed to the military rule.

**Social justice**

In context to Pakistan social injustice is a prevalent feature. Citizens of Pakistan are unaware of social justice concept and its effects on society. Pakistan’s civil and military rulers and elite class have been plundering this country since independence. Social justice is a norm, value and principle of the healthy society and identity of a prosperous peaceful country, one should realise the fact that social injustice does not only affect the life of a common man but also jeopardize national machinery. It is what on which whole system is based on and if it’s unstable than the country would be in line of where now Pakistan stands.

**Domestic violence**

Increasing domestic violence is also proving detrimental for democracy to prevail. Day to day target killing, extortion, kidnapping for ransom and other crimes made people vulnerable. Sense of insecurity is increasing and people insecure even within their homes. Protection of the life and property of the common people is the first and foremost duty of the government. But owing to government’s failure is breeding frustration among the masses which in turn is giving rise to unfavourable conditions for democracy and paving path for anti-democratic forces to come into play.

**Economic instability**

Economic stability is a hallmark of a democracy. It plays the role of a backbone for democracy. On the other hand, economic instability serves as toppling factor for democracy. Despite having all the resources and authority the government has been unable to manage the economy efficiently and come up with viable policies to improve the lives of common people. Our economy which, has already been suffering heavily at the hands of terrorism, is hit hard by recent turmoil in Karachi and floods in 2010 and 2011. Agricultural sector is witnessing a worst scenario ever. Instead of showing upward turn GDP is constantly going down. All these factors are leading Pakistan to the brink of political instability.

**Energy crisis**

Energy crisis is further adding fuel to the fire. Energy is just like fuel for the economy; similarly existence of energy crisis makes the economy vulnerable and adversely affects the industrial sector. For instance, the textile industry of Pakistan is badly hit by the energy crisis. Many textile units in Faisalabad have been closed down. In fact, the whole country is suffering from the scheduled and unscheduled power outages, which indeed have disturbed both domestic life and economic activities in the country. People have started agitating in streets and damaging public property. Thus, the energy imbalance has become a threat to the economic growth and prosperity of Pakistan.

Not only this, but energy crisis is also giving rise to unemployment. Deteriorating conditions of agricultural and industrial sectors and government’s inability to provide employment to its masses is indirectly weakening the roots of democracy. The ongoing chaos in many Arab countries is the result of the failure of the rulers to provide employment and other necessities of life to their people.

**Food crisis**

Incessant inflation coupled with food crisis is also a dangerous sign for democracy. Food commodities are getting beyond common man’s reach. The world’s financial experts have placed Pakistan on a list of 36 countries that face a serious food crisis, warning that if the situation worsen people may raid storage facilities for food. Causes of food insecurity are as various as its consequences but government’s frail management has made this issue complex and not only threatening the lives of more than 83 million Pakistanis.

**Natural calamity**

The recent natural calamity, in the shape of floods, which has paralysed our economy, is real test for the government. All the sectors of the economy, especially agriculture and industry, have been severely hampered by tis devastation. Under the above said pitiful conditions, the failure of the government to tackle this challenge would be a failure of democracy itself.

The current stream of extremism and terrorism has brought forth a new ideology. This new ideological approach is also the most immediate threat to democracy in Pakistan today. These extremist elements equally manipulate the government and the common people. Their own version of Islam has become a means of playing with the sentiments of the already deprived masses. Hence, the bearers of this new ideology of governance consider democracy non Islamic and thus completely useless for an Islamic state. The prevailing conditions of the country and the demand for implementation of sharia (their own version), is a testimony to this ideological belief. For these elements, the concept of democracy is western thus against Islam.

**Religious intolerance and Sectarianism**

Religious intolerance and Sectarianism are further inflicting a heavy damage to democracy in Pakistan. The seed of religious intolerance, that took its roots in 1979 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, has now grown into a strong tree. Every successive government has failed to provide security to minorities. Recent incidents of blatant killings of the people of Shia community have further exposed the government’s failure in protecting the minorities. In a report regarding religious freedom released by Washington Pakistan was cited among 10 countries, “failing to sufficiently protect religious rights”. The report includes a long list of case studies of violence and discrimination against Ahmedis, Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and other Muslim sects.

**Recurring foreign intervention**

Recurring foreign intervention into our national and domestic issues is also proving hazardous for democracy to sustain. A country, with sturdy democratic norms, does not allow any foreign power to intervene into its matter of domestic and national interest. Countries, especially America, are more interested in framing Pakistan’s policies than that of its own. Our national integrity is at stake due to our political disharmony and democratic redundancy. US have always exerted its influence on every government, whether it’s a democratic or military, to serve its covert interests. Its staunch support to every military ruler has caused an ineffaceable damage to democracy and has never given a fair chance to elected democratic government to survive.

Finally, Pakistan’s tarnished image across the world as a true democratic polity is not less than a threat in itself. Above all the military and quasi-military rule strangled the democratic rule in the country. World Bank and other financial institutions have persistently laid sanctions upon the Pakistan. These financial penalties and restrains upon trade is the outcome of weedy democratic in the past and frequent military coups.

From the above discussion it is evident that democracy has many threats some are internal and others from external front. The need of the hour is to show the sincerity of purpose. Following are the pragmatic solutions to fortify the flimsy democratic culture in the country.

• Political parties must be strengthened to promote political culture and avoid political disharmony.

• Sovereignty of parliament must be ensured to protect democracy from threats posed by anti-state actors.

• Judiciary should be made independent and its decisions must be respected to promote coordination among institutions.

• Educational reforms should be introduced. Government should revise its educational policy and make it much more effective both in letter and spirit.

• Political awareness must be created among the masses.

• The role of feudal lords and bureaucrats in politics must be minimised to promote democratic culture.

• Viable economic policies must be put in place to prevent economic instability and improve the lives of common people.

• There is a dire need of mature leadership avert the threats to democracy.

• Youth participation in political process must be encouraged.

• The government should furnish a worthy foreign policy and shall clearly define its level of interaction and cooperation with the world.

• An effective and efficient system of check and balances is the dire need of the hour to strengthen the democratic process.

• There are few anti-government channels that try to highlight the pessimistic side of the country, such programs should not be broadcasted as they deteriorates the image of country.

To conclude, it can be said that democracy doesn’t just spring out of thin air, it is a gradual process taking decades sometimes centuries. Our leaders must realize the importance of democracy and must respect the power delegated to them through vote. Though democracy is facing a multi-dimensional threats yet they can be tackled efficiently if will is there. Our leaders must shun their vested interests and join hands in hands to fight against all the anti-political forces. They must coordinate and utilize public power in right direction to create awareness. All the institutions must work in conformity with each other to strengthen democracy. All the contentious issues between provinces and centre must be resolved on priority basis. Good governance must be ensured to encourage democracy. Democracy can be bolstered by competent leadership who realizes and understands the real cause of failed democracy in Pakistan. The government should furnish a worthy foreign policy and shall clearly define its level of interaction and cooperation with the world. If we have to survive as a nation, we all should make collective efforts to nurture the feeble plant of democracy into a fruit and shelter giving plant.